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ABSTRACT

This booklet is designed for education association leaders for use (a) in providing sole leadership in forming citizen committees when school boards or administrators refuse to permit or encourage citizen participation, or (b) in offering guidelines to the school board or administrators in establishing effective citizen committees. The booklet is divided into the following sections: "Start with a Purpose," i.e., improve the schools; "Forming the Committee"; "Needed: Teacher Participation"; "Setting Goals, Functions of Committee"; "Planning and the Timetable"; "Some Precautions"; "Committee Study Areas"; "Reporting the Results"; "Publicizing Committee Work"; "Paying the Bills"; and "The Benefits." (JA)

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Foreword

A few years ago, teachers, administrators and board of education members spent much of their time encouraging citizen interest and participation in education. Educators found themselves practically ignored by the general public.

For years, the occasional, or annual, school tax levy was adopted or defeated by a relatively small turnout of voters; a small handful of registered voters would select (often unopposed) school board members at the annual board election; more teachers than parents attended PTA meetings; parent-teacher conferences were unheard of; and students seemed perfectly content with the curriculum. Teachers were annually reminded of the district's inability, or unwillingness, to grant more than a token raise.

But those days have disappeared. Today, the key word is *involvement*, once perhaps a cliché, but now a fact of life in many, if not most, school districts.

Teachers, often through professional negotiation, are structuring involvement in decisions affecting salaries and working conditions, class size, and the curriculum—which *they* teach.

Students, protesting what they call "irrelevance," clamor for the right to be "involved" in the planning of school policies, curriculum, and activities.

Parents flock to board of education meetings, asking for (sometimes *demanding*) changes in policies and programs. Sometimes the request comes in the form of angry, emotional confrontations with school officials.

Campaigns to raise additional funds for education, once almost certain to gain approval, are met with increasing opposition.

The growing awareness and involvement of citizens and students is understandable. Education is a personal thing. That is a primary reason why its control traditionally has been kept on the local level. But even at the local community level, no one group today—school board members, educators, or parents—can, by themselves, best prescribe the education for all children.

To be truly effective, education must flow from a *cooperative* effort by all segments of the community. In the changing education decade of the '70's, a truly "good" school system flourishes only with and through total community support and *participation*.

Value of Citizen Involvement

In too many communities, the school district's board of education or administrators have jealously guarded their "right" to direct the schools. Such an attitude ignores the valuable contributions of constructive, active community participation and student interest. And the growing interest and concern of citizens, and sometimes students, about the increasing problems of education have created a vast, untapped source of constructive advice and assistance.

Left unheeded, such interest and concern often turn into pressure, resistance, and conflict.

The era of criticism that now seems to engulf some school districts is, in part at least, a positive mark of public interest . . . and sometimes the price of public support.

Many school boards and administrators, confronted by citizen demands for involvement, might well heed the advice of one parent during a school budget hearing:

> We taxpayers want to remind you of an old saying . . . If you would have a hen lay, you must bear with her cackling.

As with most problems facing public school districts, requests or demands for greater public participation offer two alternatives: something can be done, or they can be ignored—until pressures force a reaction and perhaps conflict.

The something which can be done is *the encouragement of citizen involvement in the schools, as a source of both advice and support.*

Citizen involvement means actively utilizing citizen (or student) committees to help study, plan, and execute more responsive educational programs.

Experience has shown the benefits of citizen committees. Properly organized citizen groups, operating cooperatively with the board, administrators, and teachers on a carefully developed program, produce results. And the results and suggestions are beneficial to the children enrolled in school, the expansion of educational programs, and the improvement of school-teacher-parent-pupil relationships. Such results build better public understanding and greater public support.

Citizen committees, working cooperatively with administrators and teachers, reaffirm the principle that education is a partnership between schools and the community. Citizens have the right and the responsibility to propose "why's," "what's," and "when's."

In a few cases, education association leaders will find school boards or administrators who refuse to encourage or permit citizen participation. In these cases, association leaders will need to use this booklet in providing the sole leadership in forming citizen committees.

In many other school systems, education association leaders can offer the guidelines in this booklet to the school board or administrators and work cooperatively in establishing effective citizen committees.

Start with a Purpose

There can be only one ultimate reason for the organization of a citizen committee. That is *the improvement of schools.*

Regardless of who serves on the committee, how it is organized, or what it does, everyone concerned must recognize that the committee has but one underlying purpose for its existence: *a better, more effective school system.*

When this purpose is lost, citizen committees often become "watchdog groups" or organized pressure groups dedicated to the promotion of a specific interest other than the improvement of the community's schools.

Citizen committees, reminded of their major purpose and organized with that task in mind, can become an important instrument in dispelling public apathy toward some school matters.

Citizen committees can assist and offer advice on research required of school boards and staff members seeking to resolve education problems. They can serve, too, as a "pretest" for possible solutions drawn up by educators in an effort to solve local education problems.

Citizen committees help gain community acceptance for educational programs and projects—acceptance that may not be

acquired as quickly by board members and educators acting without benefit of a committee endorsement.

And, most important, citizen committees bring the schools and community closer together, develop greater mutual respect between citizens and teachers, and serve as the springboard for implementing steps in local educational projects.

To achieve their purpose, citizen committees usually function in three general ways:

Fact-finding—The committee seeks to obtain information and data regarding a current or impending school problem. After committee members gather the facts and analyze them, they often draw conclusions and make recommendations to the board of education.

Policy and Program Development—The committee studies various policies of the school system, evaluates them in terms of the aspirations and goals of the community and standards recommended by recognized authorities, and makes recommendations based on these findings to the school board.

Mobilizing Public Support—The committee engages in organized and systematic efforts to keep the community informed on the purposes and programs of the schools, or conducts campaigns to develop community understanding and support for major undertakings, such as financing a new school building or increasing the tax rate on property.

The procedures in all three committee functions usually take the same course. The citizen committee determines the best method for improving some phase of school operation or programs, conducts surveys or studies to unearth the facts, seeks the adoption of their recommendations by the board of education, and attempts to persuade the public that the plan should be approved.

Forming the Committee

There is no standard pattern for the formation of citizen committees. Size of the group, selection of members, type of

organization, and methods of operation vary. In some school systems, a citizen committee is organized at each school. This is an excellent method, as it permits a number of citizens to actively study, learn, and often help solve school problems.

But all successful committees of citizens have one thing in common—a recognized need for existence. The need is generally a pressing school problem on which a citizen committee can work cooperatively with the school board, administrators, and teachers. The problem may require a continuing study with an indefinite termination of the committee. If this is the case, it should be made clear that the committee may not have a definite "sign off" date, but does have a specific problem-oriented task and should confine itself to an investigation of the task.

More frequently, though, a committee is assigned a single task to be accomplished in a specified period of time and disbands when its work is completed.

When the need for citizen involvement is established, a committee is formed, usually at the invitation of the board of education. There are, however, times, as mentioned earlier, when the initiative for starting a citizen committee may come from the education association, parent groups, or other citizens.

Regardless of its origin, every citizen committee should understand from the outset that its function is just what the name implies—*advisory*, not supervisory. School boards have the legal responsibility for the conduct of the schools. While the board of education is free to accept or reject citizen committee recommendations, they are not likely to take lightly suggestions made by a citizen group which has done a good job.

Citizen committees are formed in several ways. The method of formation and selection of members can have a great deal to do with the success of the committee and acceptance of its recommendations.

Handpicked members, by the school board, administrators, or education association, may lead to accusations of a "rubber stamp" committee, a "front" group. Such a connotation can quickly defeat all the work and effort put into the committee's efforts.

Some school boards invite representatives of various community civic or fraternal groups to serve on a citizen committee.

Although this selection method may be successful, it may result in a committee that does not represent the total community, and the committee members themselves may be more interested in protecting the interests of their sponsoring organization than of the entire community.

A wiser selection method employs an invitation to a few (three to five) community leaders. These leaders are then asked to establish a committee by making a list of the citizens whom they would recommend for selection to committee membership. The list should represent a cross section of the community. Every effort should be made to obtain geographic as well as economic, racial, political, and religious balance. The committee should represent older citizens, and youth—perhaps a college or high school student. Every effort should be made to have both men and women on the committee.

Most importantly, the selection should be made on an *individual* basis—what that particular person has to contribute to the group is more important than what organization or interest group he represents. Certainly community organizations should have members serving on the committee, but not if such a role would require them to get directions from their groups before they are able to take a position on matters being studied by the total citizen committee.

Care should also be taken to include people who can provide leadership after the advisory committee is organized.

If there are known organized opponents to the problem being studied (such as the need for additional school buildings or better textbooks), it is often wise to see that these individuals are represented on the committee. This will provide the committee with the total range of opinion and give opponents a chance to constructively voice their concerns. Also, at least some of the opponents may change their thinking as a deeper understanding of the problem is acquired. It can become an effective way to squelch prejudice and selfish motives.

Needed: Teacher Participation

Whether or not the education association assumes the sole leadership role in forming a citizen committee, teachers play a

vital role in the formation and operation of the committee. Leaders of the education association can assist citizens who form the committee membership by recommending a cross section of the teaching staff, who can give the committee the viewpoints and concerns of teachers.

Sometimes, teachers as individuals or as representatives of the education association are reluctant to take an active part in the work of citizen committees. They often have strong arguments, but the additional hours of work and study in concert with citizens pay big dividends in improving communication and understanding between teachers and community leaders.

A few association leaders may reject the request for teachers to serve on citizen committees because "it is not our committee." This attitude is shortsighted and can cause teachers to miss out on cooperative efforts which often lead to important educational recommendations which can directly affect their role in the classroom.

Most teachers and association leaders encourage the vital interest shared by teachers in all aspects of the school program. Most teachers are more than willing to put forth additional time and effort to study ways to improve any part of the education program. Most citizen committees recognize that the interests of teachers (especially their interest in children) must be given consideration in any study conducted by the committee.

If representatives of the education association are not initially invited to serve on a citizen committee, they should volunteer. *Teachers, serving as individuals, should be a part of every citizen committee organized within the school district.* They should be the first consultants to whom the citizen committee turns.

As members of citizen committees, teachers, naturally, will often find that they possess superior knowledge about education matters. It may be difficult to refrain from attempting to display the superior knowledge to other citizen members less versed in education or to resist the temptation to take over leadership in committee work. However, teachers who bring educational expertise to citizen committee work have great influence on the final results of committee work if they work in a positive but restrained manner.

Some teachers who have served on citizen committees admit it is difficult to remain unbiased and examine both sides of every question. But reasonable, understanding, and willing teachers will find professional prestige, and the image of the association, greatly enhanced in the community through their efforts on the citizen committee. At the same time, teachers who attempt to increase their own benefits at the expense of benefits to children usually have just the opposite long-range effect on the community.

Citizen committee studies are golden opportunities for community awareness and recognition of teachers' concerns for better working conditions, and improvements in the tools needed to carry out their professional assignments. Lasting personal friendships are formed by members of citizen committees. The friendships may open new doors in communication and cooperation among teachers, the association, and civic groups on other matters of concern to teachers.

Many associations have found that teacher involvement in citizen study committees pays big dividends in securing citizen support for the professional negotiation goals of teachers.

Set Goals, Functions of Committee

A set of *guidelines* or policies should be designed to ensure that the proper scope and function of the committee is clear to its members as well as to teachers and administrators who may work with the committee. Before the actual selection or organization of the committee takes place, the guidelines should be printed and made available to all concerned.

The guidelines should spell out the general purpose of the committee, areas of responsibility, method of organization, how the work of the committee will be financed, and its *advisory* role. It should be made clear to whom the committee's recommendations will be made and the possible action that may result from such recommendations.

How Big?

Size and detailed organization of the committee will depend a great deal on the purpose of the committee. It should be large

enough to adequately reflect the community and provide a sufficient number of workers to perform the committee's function. It should be small enough to encourage informal, efficient, face-to-face working relationships between members.

Most authorities recommend keeping the committee under 25 members. But even committees this size, and especially those larger, should be divided into special-purpose subcommittees.

There are no hard and fast rules for the organization of a committee. *Officers* should be selected by the committee members, to make sure the group functions in an orderly manner. At the initial meeting of the committee, the school board president, superintendent, or education association leader may serve as a temporary chairman until a permanent chairman is selected by the committee. Other necessary officers, such as a vice-chairman, secretary, and perhaps a treasurer (in a tax levy promotional committee), should also be chosen. A simple set of bylaws may be necessary, too, to spell out clearly the objectives of the committee, type of operation, and duties of the officers.

A committee established to achieve a long-range study may meet only monthly. Short-term committees will meet more frequently. To keep interest high and agendas compact, meetings of committees should not exceed two hours.

Use of Subcommittees

The use of *subcommittees* should be encouraged. This widens the scope of the committee's program and taps the talents and interests of many citizens and, perhaps, students. However, the number of subcommittees depends upon the amount and type of work to be done and the number of citizens involved in the work.

Each subcommittee should understand its specific goal, and members should understand how this task ties in with the overall goal of the total committee. Each subcommittee should be assigned a definite problem to study, with brief written instructions defining the goal, limits of authority, use of school resources, and methods and timetable for reporting results. The chairman of each subcommittee is usually appointed by the general chairman of the total committee.

In a committee charged with examining the needs for additional school construction, smaller subgroups might investigate pupil population projections, site possibilities, methods of financing, etc.

A citizen committee charged with directing a school tax election campaign might include subcommittees charged with specific subprojects, such as voter registration, staff information, publicity, neighborhood information, speakers bureau, finance, and pre-election surveys.

When subcommittees are required, the chairman of each one should join other subcommittee chairmen and the general committee officers in a *steering committee*. This group will direct the day-to-day work of the total committee and assure closer coordination and liaison between committee members working in smaller, separate groups. It will also provide better continuity and decision making when the total committee meets for formulating overall recommendations.

Planning and the Timetable

One of the most important steps to success, and sometimes most neglected, is *adequate planning*.

When the citizen committee is formally organized, its first job is to thoroughly plan *exactly* what it hopes to accomplish and how the goal is to be reached. One important tool during the planning stage is the development of a timetable. This pins down the direct responsibility of each subcommittee, the time that will be alloted to each phase of the study, exactly what will be done, and when the final recommendations are to be completed. It allows the committee to "price out" each of its operations so, if necessary, the finance committee will know how much money must be raised to finance the work of the group. This is especially important to citizen committees conducting a voter information campaign before a school finance election.

A timetable also improves lines of communication with the necessary staff resource people and any outside consultants that may be required. It spells out when subcommittees will be visiting

any or all of the schools to better understand school operations. It describes when and what type of essential secretarial and duplicating services are required. It provides the news media and general public with a clear-cut schedule of meetings of the total committee, which should always be open to the public.

The vital planning stage might occupy the first two or three meetings of the committee. It's time well spent. Good planning helps eliminate friction, possible misunderstandings, and uncertainty in the overall progress of the committee's work.

Some Precautions

Formulation of guidelines by the committee in the planning process may help eliminate some of the pitfalls that have hindered some committees in the past. It's important that both committee members and school staff members clearly understand some of the difficulties that may arise, even with well-intentioned people serving on a well-organized committee.

One important point committee members must keep in mind is that they must focus work on their primary objective.

They must avoid dealing in personalities. It is not their job to point the finger of blame at anyone. At the same time, committees must be careful not to make rash judgments or to promote biased notions that some members of the group may have.

If the work of the committee involves a study of curriculum or of school needs, committee members should make every effort to avoid any interruptions of on-going school classes. Educational programs must proceed normally even though committee members may be visiting schools and school offices. Preplanning and scheduling such visitations will reduce the chance of disruption of the school or office.

Although study committees usually recommend some changes in the way schools are operated, it does not mean that they only point out deficiencies. The findings of a citizen committee will be more welcome, both to educators and to the public, and more readily accepted, if the committee has also searched for and described that which is done well in the schools.

Committees charged with the task of studying the needs of the schools should focus that study on both present and future needs. Citizens' concepts of public education, as expressed in their recommendations, should be realistic and sensible—but there must always be room for some dreams.

The committee's relationship with the school staff must be one of a *cooperative partnership*. To bring about this relationship, the school staff—especially teachers—must be informed periodically of progress that is being made in the work of the committee.

Sometimes citizen committees (which are, after all, made up of people) tend to overgeneralize and to oversimplify in the recommendations they leave to school personnel. Some citizens leave a committee as new-found experts who have most, if not all, of the "answers." Occasionally a few citizens, serving on such committees, do not truly learn the incredible complexity of operating a school system, especially a big one. A very few may even picture themselves as the spokesmen for the schools, with more knowledge and assumed authority than the school board.

One other precaution: Committee members need to guard against such pitfalls as twisting facts to fit preconceived notions and acting before obtaining all the facts. Members need honest interpretation of the facts (even though there may be a few with the "Don't confuse me with facts, my mind is made up" attitude). Any manipulation, shortcuts, or alterations in a clear-cut fact-gathering assignment can result in detriment, not improvement, to the education of children.

These precautions apply to a very small handful of citizens who serve on citizen committees. There may be a small element of risk, but most educators who have worked with citizen committees prefer this risk to the greater danger involved in not utilizing the services and talents of citizens in studying and improving the schools.

Committee Study Areas

There are many areas in the operation of a school system that could benefit from the services of a citizen committee. Whether the committee functions as a fact-finding group, a study

committee, or to disseminate information, there are a variety of school needs that can be served.

Here is a list of some of the areas in which citizen committees have been helpful:

- Curriculum studies
- School finance studies
- School policies and objectives
- Community relations
- Studies of modern teaching methods
- Bond and levy information campaigns
- Building or facilities-needs analysis
- School-community safety council
- Adult education needs
- School-community recreation needs
- Budget analysis
- Population, enrollment projections
- Pupil performance
- Year 'round public relations program
- School transportation
- Salaries
- Community resources for schools
- Teacher-community relations
- Reporting to parents
- Drug abuse and prevention
- Annexation, consolidation studies
- Attendance area boundaries
- Setting district goals, objectives
- Conducting opinion surveys
- Teaching conditions
- Personnel evaluations
- Structure and operation of almost any program or service offered by the schools

A quick review of the list also indicates the necessity for teacher involvement and participation on each one of the committees.

One additional precaution: A citizen committee should not take on more work than it can handle. No committee should try to tackle more than one or two problems at a time.

And this reminder: Citizen committees are study groups or information groups. They should not turn into a "complaint bureau," a professional ethics committee, a teacher evaluation board, or any other form of watchdog group. The best interests of the community's public schools cannot be served in that way.

Committee at Work

A citizen committee project is just plain work. This applies to the citizens who serve on the committee and teachers and administrators who take part. In both cases, it's an additional assignment over and above the regular jobs of committee members.

If a committee is organized for the purpose of studying some problem confronting the local schools, it should begin with a simple *fact-finding* procedure. Each committee member volunteers or is assigned responsibility for collecting factual information on some aspect of the matter being investigated. He may work alone or as a member of a team. He may secure information from and with the assistance of school personnel or gather it elsewhere, depending upon the problem. For example, in a study of school building needs, the superintendent and his staff may furnish data on population trends, family size, school enrollments, number of children per dwelling, etc. Other sources in the community may be used to obtain other vital statistics such as population movement, land use, zoning restrictions, planning studies, etc.

Fact-finding is followed by *organizing*, *classifying*, and *analyzing* data. At this stage of the study, errors can be prevented if the committee works closely with the board of education and the professional staff in weighing facts and interpreting their meanings.

(Booklet #1 of the "PR Bookshelf" series, *School Finance Campaign Handbook*, describes in detail the steps to be undertaken by a citizen committee working on passing a school finance election.)

Reporting the Results

When the work of a citizen committee has been completed, the method of reporting the results to the proper people in the proper manner can have a great bearing on acceptance of the findings.

First of all, the report must be written to reflect the opinion of the citizen committee as a whole. Individuals do not report their findings or conclusions separately. A minority report, conflicting with the opinion of the majority of committee members, is not recommended. Differences in conclusions reached should be compromised *within the committee*. The final report should then contain a recommendation on which the entire committee can agree. Subcommittee reports should be reviewed by the entire citizen committee and made a part of the total group's final report.

If the citizen committee was organized and the study made at the request of the board of education, then the final report of the committee should be presented to the board before it is made public. As the report is put together, the board should be kept aware of the progress.

A review of the final report should be the subject of a joint meeting of the board, administration, education association, and representatives of the citizen committee before any action is taken. The results of the review should be discussed at a meeting of the entire citizen committee before the final report is published to the community.

Publicizing Committee Work

There is no reason to keep the activities of a citizen committee a secret.

Before the committee is formed, the board of education should inform the news media that such a committee is to be organized and for what purpose. Committee members' names should be included in the announcement. Committee officers should be identified and hopefully photographed by the news media.

As the work of the committee progresses, frequent reports on its activities should be made public. If it is a study committee, the community should know what is being studied and why, how, and by whom. If the committee's purpose is to disseminate information, the news media, the school system's and the education association's newsletters should be utilized as primary vehicles for the committee's work.

When the final report and recommendations have been presented to the board of education, it is preferable to let the board handle the publicity about committee recommendations. It is also the responsibility of the board to publicly describe what action it may take as a result of the advisory committee study.

Even though the board of education must make the final decision as to the implementation of the committee's final recommendations, it has a moral obligation to consider them carefully. If all or some recommendations cannot be accepted, a logical and convincing explanation should be made.

The board should also publicly disband the committee, with appropriate thanks and appreciation for the work and effort members have given toward improvement of schools.

Paying the Bills

The activities of citizen committees usually require some type of financing. Availability of funds can determine the effectiveness of the committee's work.

If the committee is purely a study group, advisory in nature to the board of education, expenses usually can legally be paid with school funds. All citizen committees formed under the auspices of the board should expect to use school facilities for meetings. Committees may also expect, in most cases, that necessary secretarial help and supplies will be furnished by the school

district. The printing of the final report of the committee may also be assumed by the school district.

When a committee undertakes an independent study or is formed to promote passage of a bond or tax levy, it should be financially self-supporting. A finance committee should be formed to solicit contributions to finance the work of the committee. Citizens who assume this important task obtain contributions from business, industry, labor, and community groups, from real estate brokers and subdivision developers, and from interested citizens. The amount needed to successfully complete the work of the citizen committee can be determined from the timetable and action program planned by the group. (See booklet #1, *School Finance Campaign Handbook*, in this series.)

Not all of the backing given a citizen committee need be in the form of monetary contributions. Voluntary work on the part of skilled members of the committee can be an even more important contribution. The efforts of teachers, lawyers, writers, printers, PR experts, etc., can be substituted for some financial backing.

The organizational and professional skills of teachers, through education associations, can be a major factor in the manpower needs and progress of a citizen committee.

The Benefits

Here is a summary of some of the values and dividends obtained through a citizen committee in one community, which is typical of most:

The most important product was the process itself—citizens and educators together, talking, and confronting the educational issues in today's world.

Questions were posed for which there were no immediate answers and yet answers were found.

Information was requested where research was required and conducted. Horizons were widened. Understandings were improved. Sights were more sharply focused.

The education process was at work.

The advantages of asking a citizen committee to tackle difficult school problems far outweigh the few dangers involved.

They frequently are helpful in dispelling public apathy that too often allows a loud, dissident minority to be heard above all others in school matters.

They often gain community understanding and support for educational projects more quickly than school officials. Sometimes members of the general public indicate that school authorities are "dreaming up" costly and largely unnecessary innovations. When a citizen committee recommends the same ideas, public acceptance may be more quickly evident.

Citizen committees, composed of non-educators, teachers, and administrators, bring the community and the schools closer together, creating goodwill and mutual respect that would not develop without such a close working relationship.

Efforts of citizen committees can be a great service to school personnel by relieving educators of some of the workload in carrying out exhaustive research required in educational problem solving. The many fruitful suggestions that have come as a result of citizen committee work have been of great benefit to students, staff members, boards of education, and the local community.

Citizen committees create public awareness of the scope and intensity of the needs of teachers and the public schools. Recommendations of citizen committees help broaden public understanding and improve public attitudes toward education.

At the same time, citizen committees help establish a stronger rapport between the education association and citizens of the community . . . a partnership that is vital to the continued improvement of education.

This is booklet #8 in a series of 10 booklets written for education associations by the public relations department of your state association and the NEA's Division of Press, Radio, and Television Relations and Division of Organization Relations.

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Booklets in this series are—

Booklet #1—School Finance Campaign Handbook
#2—Tips for the PR Chairman
#3—The PR in PN
#4—Internal PR
#5—Publishing a Newsletter
#6—A Primer in Publicity
#7—The Feedback Process
#8—Developing Citizen Committees
#9—Press, Radio, and TV Tips
#10—Community Decision-Making